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AUTHOR(S):

Pérez Pereiro, Alberto

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The Khmer Lands of Vietnam: Environment, Cosmology and Sovereignty

PHILIP TAYLOR

Singapore: NUS Press, 2014, 350p.

The Khmer minority of Vietnam, which is indigenous to the Mekong Delta, has long been a bone of contention between the Vietnamese and Cambodian states. From the perspective of the Vietnamese, the delta region was a wilderness which was only tamed when they began to colonize the area and build a productive economy—something which has benefited everyone, including the local Khmers. On the other hand, this historically Khmer-speaking territory, now firmly in the possession of Vietnam, is, for many Cambodians, a historical injustice in need of redress, as well as an ominous reminder of just how weak the Cambodian state is compared to its neighbors. Academic, journalistic, and polemical writings on this issue typically address issues of human rights in Vietnam or political relations between the two countries, but Philip Taylor's book looks at the situation from a different angle, neither from the point of view of Hanoi or Phnom Penh, but rather from the perspective of the Khmer Krom people themselves without subordinating their voices to those of state-level actors.

Taylor's presentation of the Khmer Krom understanding of history, engagement with the economy, and orientation toward the future negate the notion that the Khmers of southern Vietnam are merely an extension of the Cambodian body politic whose interests might lie in a reunification with it. At the same time, Taylor effectively undermines the official Vietnamese narrative that the Khmer inhabitants have failed to develop the region prior to the arrival of the Vietnamese because of their indolence and backwardness, by showing how the Khmers have in fact been very successful in adapting themselves to an inhospitable environment. The book itself is organized into seven chapters describing in detail the ways in which Khmers conduct their social, economic, and religious lives in each of the ecological regions in which Khmers live. These are the coastal dune belt, coastal river-dune complex, freshwater rivers, saltwater rivers, flooded mountains, ocean-side mountains, and the northeast uplands.

Far from being backwards, the Khmer Krom are resourceful engineers who have succeeded in building communities in a land vulnerable to seawater incursions and where groundwater is often undrinkable. The reader truly appreciates the exquisite nature of these adaptations to each different type of hydrological environment in the delta, and the degree to which the contemporary land and economy, which the Vietnamese narrative attributes to the modern and forward-thinking

character of the government, has only been possible through the introduction of machinery and technology that would first have arrived in the French colonial period. The transformations of the eco-scape with a view to intensifying production continued into the post-independence period and into the late 1990s, and displaced large numbers of Khmers, making their traditional livelihoods more precarious or ending them completely. In each chapter, we see the diverse strategies by which Khmers alter their lifeways to meet the challenges and opportunities that present themselves in each region.

Taylor presents the Khmer Buddhist moral cosmology as the lens through which Khmer Krom construct history and make sense of these present-day circumstances. In this vision of the world, decay and degeneration are relentless forces and it is incumbent upon each Buddhist to preserve himself against them by rejecting the primacy of political life and remembering the signs of moral history inscribed in the landscape. Kampuchea Krom is a land where Buddha statues miraculously float upriver to a new temple, retracing the path of Khmer refugees who abandoned their homes in the Indochina wars. Magic boats sink beneath the waters and hide themselves along with their treasures while their spirits enforce proper standards of morality on people traveling in the area. A Khmer queen flees Cambodia only to drown on her way to the sea where her dying body gives form and life to the multitudes of plants and animals found in the region today.

These conceptions of the past are productive in engaging with the current political realities and in crafting community and personal identities in response to the environmental, social, and political exigencies that Khmer Krom face. The Khmer Krom understand themselves to be the cradle of modern Khmer culture. Speaking and writing Khmer and practicing Theravada Buddhism, they have married this culture to modernity in a way that has not quite happened in Cambodia. The success of this openness to the modern is manifest in the considerable influence that Khmer Krom such as Son Ngoc Thanh, who founded the first Khmer-language newspaper in 1936, have had on the culture of Cambodia in the past century in the fields of government, religion, and the arts.

Yet even this commitment to making Khmer culture live in a modern context varies from region to region and is naturally subject to variation at the personal level. While Khmer Krom maintain an attachment to their language and religion, they are of different minds when it comes to their embrace of the cosmopolitan quality of life in the delta with its mix of Vietnamese, Khmer, Cham Muslim, and Chinese populations. The Buddhist wat (temple) which has long served as the locus of Khmer learning is still important to developing a local Khmer intellectual life in areas like Preah Trapeang, but the large number of Khmer students residing in the wats of Ho Chi Minh City belies the fact that the majority of these young people are actually there to avail themselves of the opportunities for study available in the metropolis, which are exclusively Vietnamese.

Khmer Lands is an important book on the problem of Kampuchea Krom because it places local agency and creativity in the foreground of events. Its treatment of the interaction between peoples and institutions mediated by geography and economy, and resulting in an ethnic Khmer identity

that is resilient but flexible in the face of changing circumstances makes this work indispensable to anyone interested in understanding Khmer-Vietnamese social relations, and an important contribution to the literature on state minorities in the Southeast Asia region.

Alberto Pérez Pereiro
Breogán Consulting

Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands

SARAH TURNER, CHRISTINE BONNIN, and JEAN MICHAUD

Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015, 223p.

By choosing to work on the livelihoods of one ethnic group, the Hmong, on both sides of the international Sino-Vietnamese border, this study focuses on how these people make and negotiate livelihood decisions in their complicated geographic, socioeconomic, and political contexts. The study provides a vivid description of a myriad of activities in the everyday lives of Hmong on the fringes as they make their living in the sectors of agriculture, livestock transactions, locally distilled alcohol, cardamom, and the textile trade. These livelihoods have been shaped by various integrations and negotiations between their own background of environment, culture, local knowledge, and identities, and agents and institutions of the state.

In the first two chapters, “Upland Alternative: An Introduction” and “Frontier Dynamics: Borders and the Hmong,” the authors clarify the borderlands as a “third space” and suggest a theoretical framework to approach and facilitate a more comprehensive insight into how the Hmong people are “making a living and trying to maintain their cultures and identity” (p. 15). This “third space” is the area on both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border, Yunnan in China and upland northern Vietnam, which has been attracting a range of development schemes and policies issued on both sides in the name of speeding up the economic development of this undeveloped region. Tracing other associated political reasons, the authors view these state efforts as part of an “internal colonization scheme” (p. 27) that has an effect, direct or indirect, on Hmong livelihood decision making. On the other hand, using a bottom-up approach, the authors offer a “locally adapted, nuanced analysis of livelihoods” (p. 7) with the Hmong people passively acting as a local agency to “navigate, rework, contest and appropriate specific facets of identity, modernity, market integration, and nation-state building as they go about creating resilient life-worlds and everyday livelihood” (p. 7).

Chapter 3, “Borderland Livelihoods: Everyday Decisions and Agrarian Change,” focuses on the most important livelihood activity of Hmong on both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border, the agricultural sector. This sector has changed a lot under the effect of state development schemes,